

BEVERAGES

Selective sipping down to a tea

Forget jiggling and dangling, tea has suddenly become a fashion item.

By JANE FAULKNER

When it comes to our daily cuppa, it appears most Australians still choose to jiggle or dangle. Yet specialty tea houses are thriving.

The very English image of ladies taking elevenses, with their pinkies extended from fine bone china cups, has been replaced with plungers, infusers, green tea, black tea, herbal tea and a hip clientele.

This tea revival started in the early '90s with Penelope Sach, a Sydney naturopath who turned herbal infusions into an up-market and super trendy commodity that sold in the hippest restaurants at \$5 a glass.

On the shelves of the best gourmet food stores, Sach's pot-pourri-like leaves are so irresistibly packaged you can almost overlook the price, which averages at \$436 a kilogram.

Jan O'Connor and Maryanne Shearer, of the specialty tea retailer Tea Too, have replicated Sach's winning marketing ploy and expensive pricing policy, and aficionados

can't get enough of their products.

Their sharp and minimalist Brunswick Street store stocks 30 herbal infusions and umpteen black and green teas, all presented in gorgeous black and pink paper bags or resealable plastic ones.

In less than two years, Tea Too's wholesale and retail concept shop has boomed. They opened their second shop in St Kilda last year (the Fitzroy Street outlet is soon to close, but the search for larger premises continues), another is to open in the city, and one in Sydney by the end of the year. They also offer a mail order service.

They supply special brews to more than 50 restaurants and cafes and their customer base increases daily.

"Tea Too has captured a niche market and I think what we've managed to do is create an awareness of alternatives. A lot of people didn't realise there was anything more than Bushells and Liptons," says O'Connor.

She says English breakfast is still their top-selling tea, although more unusual blends, particularly a Japanese green tea flavored with quince and a blend of secret herbs and spices in Special B, are popular.

David Thompson, an importer and connoisseur of Indian tea, has also seen a resurgence of interest in loose-leaf tea in the past few years, judging by the volume of customers flocking to his Fitzroy shop, Larsen and Thompson.

Thompson says quality loose leaf tea has a special allure, not just for its flavor, but also for the associated ritual — taking time out to prepare the brew. "There's a romance to it and tea is more passive while coffee is a powerful drug."

In fact, imbibing tea appears to be healthy. Recent studies reveal that certain teas can protect us against some cancers, heart disease and help reduce cholesterol. Earlier this month, a CSIRO laboratory study suggested milky tea might protect us against developing skin cancers.

Tea Too and Larsen and Thompson are part of what appears to be a mini-boom in specialist tea shops. In the past few years, a clutch of outlets has sprung up around Melbourne, including Tea Chadstone, Time for Tea in Canterbury and Glen Waverley and Tea Leaves in Sassafras, to name a few.

While tea lovers will seek out these specialist shops, statistics show that most of us still grab a packet of tea from the supermarket shelf. In fact, most Australians buy teabags. Nationally, in the 12 months to April 1998 at supermarkets nationally, we spent \$167 million on teabags out of a total tea purchase of \$203 million.

But to connoisseurs, the teabag is a repository for the poorer grades of tea, and that means less flavor. Thompson concedes the little dangles are convenient, but says the teabag-making machines can cope

only with smaller leaves, even if quality teas are used. These smaller or broken leaves often include fannings — crudely referred to as the dust from the tea estate's floor.

"I don't deal in teabags," says Thompson, "I deal in top grade loose teas, because they're much better in quality. I work within a niche market where I'm selling fine quality teas and maybe, the niche I'm working in is gaining at the expense of teabags."

That may be true, but overall our consumption of tea is well behind coffee, and falling. According to the most recent Australian Bureau of Statistics findings, each of us drinks 900 grams of tea a year compared with 2.2 kilograms of coffee. Sixty years ago, we drank 3.1 kilos of tea and 300 grams of coffee.

Dr Sandro Mangosi, a food specialist from research firm BIS Shrapnel, says it is difficult to pinpoint the reason for the trend. He says even "the afternoon tea ritual with office workers is disappearing; it's more the coffee break now".

Still, Thompson is optimistic about the future of tea. He believes it will one day be elevated to the same linguistic coding as coffee: instead of talking about arabica or robusta beans, caffe latte or macchiato, we will choose fermented or unfermented brews, and order in terms of quality classification, such as tippy golden flowery orange pekoe.



Pour thing: Jan O'Connor of tea retailer Tea Too. Picture: CATHRYN TREMAIN